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# Canadian Magazine



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## EVERY WOMAN'S AN EVE

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# MANHATTAN CRUNCH

The \$40,000,000 venture that overpowered the Northwest Passage  
By Barry Craig    Photography: Don Newlands





On a bright Arctic morning this September, the huge American oil tanker SS Manhattan, her black hull scarred by a 15-day battle with ice, ended her historic thrust through the Northwest Passage. Helped by the tough, chunky Canadian icebreaker John A. Macdonald, the Manhattan became the first commercial

vessel to bull her way through the Passage. Reporter Barry Craig was aboard the Macdonald and he describes here how the Macdonald and the Manhattan won their fight with the frigid waters of the Arctic.

**THEY PLOWED** together through some of the most treacherous waters in the world, like some

nautical odd couple — the pudgy Macdonald shuddering and rolling in the ice, the enormous Humble

Oil tanker Manhattan behaving as though her little escort were not even there.

The Manhattan



The Sir John A. Macdonald







## The mast rolls through a slow arc against the sky, like some giant metronome

*continued*

simply ignores the elements. There is no feeling of motion aboard her; inside, she looks more like a walk-up apartment, and a cheap one at that, than a vessel: square windows, apartment numbers on the doors, executive desks that belong in office towers.

The seaman using a punching bag in her gym doesn't miss a beat as she smashes through a 60-foot chunk of ice. Her anchor housing will accommodate 180 people. She has an elevator to the engine room, a daily newspaper. She is so huge the crew must hold a reunion aboard her every week.

But she is the one that gets stuck in the ice nevertheless. This giant is the pride of U.S. technology and it is the Macdonald, the Canadian, that has to lead her by the hand.

And chauvinism blossoms on the Canadian icebreaker: the Manhattan irked the Canadians on the first day that the two ships met by saying she'd slow down for the Macdonald. Now the Macdonald must slow down for the Manhattan.

There's a joke going the rounds on

Macdonald: it grew when Humble Oil's big ship first got stuck. "They're eating humble pie tonight."

\* \* \*

We first meet the Manhattan on Monday, Sept. 1, in the Davis Strait, 265 miles out from Frobisher Bay, and together we head north toward a polar ice floe, 60 miles wide, along the coast of Baffin Island. The waters are monotonous, unending and frigid – if a man fell in, he'd be numb in 40 seconds, dead in four minutes.

But the only danger just now is growlers, independent chunks of sea ice that always surround an ice pack and float aimlessly south. The fog moves in so we decide not to tackle the solid ice floe. The next day, Tuesday, we are further north up the strait, 86 miles west of Denmark's Greenland. There is too much ice for the Manhattan to avoid. There are chunks 12 feet wide.

The water is choppy and the wind is up. The Macdonald is bouncing around. Plates in the galley are shattering on the floor. The Macdonald urges the Manhattan to move faster through the ice by setting a bold example: she charges at the ice chunks, at 10 knots, and bounces off them.

The Manhattan is slowly accelerating, gaining confidence. Eight knots. Her special 700-ton icebreaking bow smashes through floating sea ice as though it were warm bread. Schools of white beluga whales swim down from the north to greet us.

Wednesday. The wind howls at 25 m.p.h., the waves are 10 feet high and coffee slops in its saucer aboard the Macdonald. The mast rolls through a slow arc against the sky, like some giant metronome. The water crashes and thuds against the sides of our vessels; the wind howls at them, and around them there is nothing but a desert of sea, whipped up here and there to tongues of white foam. But they plow stubbornly onward, even when the intermittent sheets of polar ice scrape against their iron sides with all the agony of fingernails scraping across a blackboard.

The Macdonald rises to the ice as if going up in an elevator, balances herself uneasily atop it, then falls down with a wicked sideways roll as the ice cracks apart under her weight.

And as they crush the frozen sea, huge chunks of it boil in the water and climb atop each other as if competing for the right to rise up and personally destroy the ships.

**B**ut inside the Macdonald, as she bullies her way along, the noises are strangely urban.

The sea may thrash itself into a storm with near-gale winds, the ice may be 10 times the thickness of a

*Did anyone think of the Titanic during the voyage? Probably not, so far has man come. His technology was even equal to the task of recovering a foundered helicopter (top, far left).*

brick wall, and just as hard, but inside the carpeted officers' wardroom aboard the Macdonald the voice of folk singer Gordon Lightfoot pours uninterrupted from a tape recorder: "... and the big steel rail gonna carry me home."

"It's gonna do just that," barks a crew member, "if you don't turn that damn thing off. Can't you read?"

Tucked inside the machine is the order: **THIS MACHINE NOT TO BE OPERATED WHILE BREAKING ICE.**

But the offender is far from deflated. "This isn't ice," he says, "it's just a bunch of overgrown popsicles."

And while the world outside tries to destroy an intruder, while the ice moans in some of the most treacherous waters in the world, while icebergs the size of houses roll drunkenly by, the world inside – content that its technology and experience can withstand nature's onslaughts – busies itself in a domestic argument.

Both Manhattan and Macdonald have systems that can shift their balance from side to side to free them from ice. A few observers take seasick pills and skip the kidney pie. We steam



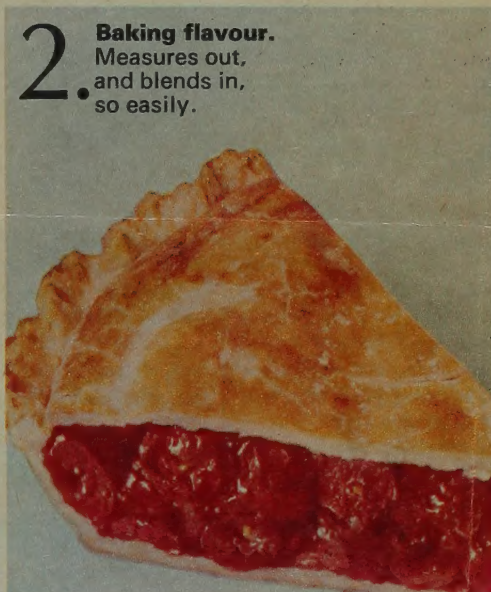


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continued

## "Go, lady, go," yells the skipper of the Macdonald as the trapped Manhattan pours on full power

between the icebergs at 16 knots. As icebergs float by, helicopter engineer Ed Ironmonger concentrates on making a model of a Danish paddlewheeler.

Thursday. We anchor in the harbor off Thule. This is the coast of Greenland, 900 miles below the North Pole, and the view is forbidding. It's as desolate as the moon. VIPs come aboard by helicopter. It's a sunny day and the crews relax. Macdonald boatswain J. J. Harris unlimbers a dinghy and sticks a 20-h.p. motor on it so he can skim over the icy waters, dodging ice chunks like an aquatic Stirling Moss.

Friday. We're heading across to the entrance of the Northwest Passage. The northern tip of Baffin Island is on our left, Devon Island is on the right. As we approach Lancaster Sound, Ian Watson, chairman of the Commons Committee on Indian Affairs and Northern Development, flies over to beam down a message of welcome to Canadian waters. The U.S. claims the passage is international waters and Watson, of course, knows this. The message is received without comment.

"We're here to wave the flag," Watson said later.

In a press briefing aboard the Manhattan, Harry Flemming, a special assistant to President Richard Nixon, was asked about the question of Canadian sovereignty in the passage and whether the United States recognized it as Canadian or international waters.

"I'd rather not talk about that," was Flemming's reply, typical of the reaction of Manhattan officials when they were asked the same question.

**B**ut Watson and the committee, though ultra-polite (as anyone would be welcoming foreigners to their own country), were adamant: "These are Canadian waters. The committee is unanimous about that."

(A week before, in a press briefing in Ottawa, conducted by the heads of various government agencies, the legal head of the Department of External Affairs said Canada welcomed the Manhattan attempt. But privately one official was inspired to comment: "I think we should send out our jets to meet them.")

George Garbutt, the Macdonald's helicopter pilot, noted that the Man-

hattan was not flying the Canadian flag. "I was thinking," he said, "of dropping one on their deck, weighed down by a sandbag." What would happen if it hit someone? "Too bad," remarked George.

Saturday. Thirteen MPs board the Manhattan and eat with officers and officials of Humble Oil. We are now half-way through the passage, in Resolute Bay. There are no problems as we move through intermittent ice.

Sunday-Monday. We steam across Viscount Melville Sound, 230 miles, toward Melville Island. The ice seems endless but we are making six knots. The U.S. Coast Guard icebreaker Northwind, which joined us before entering the passage, is limping along with a twisted crankshaft, letting the Macdonald and Manhattan break ice for her.

Tuesday - 10 a.m. "Manhattan to C.G.B.K." Those are the call letters of the icebreaker Macdonald. Third Officer John Varse rushes across the linoleum on the bridge to answer. "C.G.B.K. We appear to be blocked. C.G.B.K. Request you break the ice around our propellers." We are 32 miles southeast of Cape Providence on Melville Island.

The Manhattan, for the first time, is really stuck.

She is wedged in a polar ice floe, under pressure from 28 m.p.h. winds.

The Macdonald captain, a master in the ice, has already been up all night trying to nurse the crippled Northwind, trudging around her to break the ice that seals her in. The ice up here is punishing and it is no place for cripples; ice under pressure forms again after it's broken. Northwind will have to return to Resolute Bay.



*Ice forms on the superstructure of the Manhattan in Melville Sound.*

And now the Manhattan is stuck. In eight-foot ice.

The Macdonald breaks her free.

Wednesday. The Manhattan's jet helicopter falls part way through the ice. No one is injured, and the Macdonald hauls it aboard in a dramatic

display of seamanship. Twice today the Macdonald rescues the Manhattan from the ice.

The overwhelming thing about it all is the fact the 126 Americans aboard the 150,000-ton Manhattan admit they've had about as much experience confronting polar ice as girls in a stenographers' pool.

"We're just a group of warm-water Texans," beams Stanley Haas, project manager for the Manhattan's attempt, as if that were a universal cure-all.

And he is just about right, for, with the exception of the Canadian liaison officer aboard her, Capt. Tom Pullen, the only experience in polar ice seamanship that the Manhattan's crew ever had was the year before; her mates had been given a crash training program by Canada and led into ice more or less by the hand - which is a little like being shown radio pictures of the moon, then being told to reach it.

"It's asking a lot of them," says Admiral Tony Storrs, director of the Department of Transport's marine division and second-in-command of the Canadian Coast Guard. "After all, the captains on the Manhattan [there were three taking turns] have been taught all their lives to stay away from things. Now they're being asked to smash through them deliberately. It's against their nature."

The Manhattan is so huge, so uncommonly huge (the venture is costing about \$40,000,000), that there is something regal about her as she plows through the ice up to 10 feet thick and runs the gauntlet of ice.

Thursday. The Manhattan decides that, instead of turning south and heading through the open water of Prince of Wales Strait, she will continue west



50-60-70-80 miles. She has been stuck, three, four times, and each time the Macdonald has broken ice around her. She is battling pressure ridges - hills of ice - having to rush them, and then back off and rush again.

**S**he is stuck again and this time the Macdonald can't break her loose. There is talk of towing her out. But 150,000 tons? She is 30 times as big as the Macdonald.

Friday. The Manhattan takes a risk - she turns on all her power, even cutting off her steam winches and heating so she can pour all the power into her turbines. It works. She makes the world's toughest U-turn. "Go, lady, go," yells Macdonald Master Paul Fournier.

Saturday. There is ice 40 miles deep in Prince of Wales Strait; the wind has shifted and pushed it in. Ice damages one of the Manhattan's two rudders.

Sunday. Another giant chunk of ice attacks the Macdonald. One of her props has a bent or broken blade. At one point, battling pressure ridges, the vessels make 500 feet in an hour.

Monday. The Manhattan has found that no ship can get through the passage without passing through Canadian waters. For this very morning she passed Princess Royal Islands, which Canada owns, and she had to pass within less than three miles of them - well inside the three-mile territorial limit long established in international law. So, even if the rest of the passage was in international waters, there's one spot it decidedly was not.

Finally the tired vessels, damaged but unbeatable, are in open water, and they head for Sachs Harbor on Banks Island, and the end of the passage. Humble Oil breaks out the champagne. It's done. It's the music of history as the Manhattan swishes toward Sachs. An explorer's dream. Fifteen days to do what was at times a nightmare. The paint is scraped but she has made it. And now she is in the history books. ☼